



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group, File
Rancher Riley Martin feeds his cattle April 5, 2021, from the back of a tractor at the family's North Powder farm.

Meat:

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Secretary, and one of the federal officials who met with Biden recently in a virtual meeting to discuss the situation.

The resulting plan, which was announced on Jan. 3, has among its goals enforcing existing competition laws and making the machinations of the cattle markets more transparent.

That new federal focus is welcome news for Martin, who has been concerned for many years about what he considers an unfair manipulation of beef markets by the four companies that control about 85% of the country's cattle processing — Cargill, Tyson Foods, JBS and National Beef Packing.

While retail beef prices have risen by 21% during the past year, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, that trend hasn't been reflected in what ranchers are receiving for their cattle, Martin said.

Tom Sharp, the Oregon Cattlemen's president, addressed the rise in beef prices in an October 2021 interview with the Pacific Northwest Ag Network.

"Those profits have largely gone solely to the major beef packing companies that dominate boxed beef production here in the United States," Sharp said. "There's really four multinational companies that produce 83% of the total boxed beef for retail consumption here in the United States."

Martin said he believes one way to reduce the dominance those four companies have is to encourage more local and regional processing of beef.

That also would give ranchers more options for marketing their cattle, and boost consumer choice, potentially affording them the option of buying beef raised, and butchered, in the same county where they live.

Martin said there is a sufficient number of beef cattle in Eastern Oregon and Western Idaho to support processing plants with a capacity to handle 250 to 500 head per day.

But now, he said, "we have absolutely no competition in the Northwest. There's no negotiation. You take what is given to you (in terms of prices)."

Martin pointed to Agri Beef's construction of a beef processing plant in Jerome, Idaho. It's expected to open by the end of 2022, and will have a capacity of about 500 head per day.

"That's a great thing, but I still see the need for more competition," Martin said.

Smaller processing plants also would benefit rural economies by creating jobs, he said.

Increasing options

Martin said he's encouraged Attorney General Merrick Garland also partic-

ipated in the recent virtual meeting.

Martin has been advocating for years to have the U.S. Justice Department investigate what he believes constitutes "price manipulation" in the beef industry.

Matt McElligott, who raises cattle between Haines and North Powder, said he's glad issues in the beef industry are being acknowledged at the federal level.

"The good thing is that it is being talked about," said McElligott, who is chairman of the public lands committee for the Oregon Cattlemen's Association and current president-elect. "It's something we in the industry have been talking about for a long time, the need to have a more vibrant and competitive industry."

McElligott said although details of the Biden administration's \$1 billion campaign have yet to be determined, a preliminary draft called for spending \$375 million, over two phases, to "jumpstart independent processing" for beef and other meat.

The first phase could include \$150 million earmarked for 15 specific local processing projects, which could potentially help ranchers market beef to local consumers, McElligott said. Prospective processors would compete for the dollars under the proposal.

The second phase would designate the remaining \$225 million to expand the capacity at existing processing plants across the nation, he said.

McElligott said boosting independent processing, and thus reducing the dominance of the four leading processing companies, would be beneficial to both ranchers and consumers.

"The more processing you have, the more opportunities we have for different markets for the cow-calf producer," he said. "That gives producers more options and it gives consumers more options."

Now, only about 5% of the beef cattle born in Oregon are actually butchered here, McElligott said.

Both he and Martin pointed out that building a processing plant is no small undertaking.

"To say it's complex is an understatement for sure," Martin said.

Complying with federal food safety rules and other regulations is neither simple nor inexpensive, and Martin said he hopes the Biden administration's \$1 billion campaign also includes resources to help potential entrepreneurs negotiate the regulatory labyrinth.

Among other things, he advocates for the federal government to eliminate or streamline regulations that deter people from pursuing regional or local processing plants, and to assign a coordinator to work with prospective owners to help them with all aspects of the endeavor, including financing.

McElligott said a significant obstacle in the industry for ranchers who want to sell

beef directly to local customers is that packaged products must be inspected by someone certified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

He said he can sell a half of beef "on the hoof" to a neighbor, but not a single pound of packaged hamburger unless it's been inspected.

McElligott said he's encouraged that a draft plan for spending the \$1 billion includes \$100 million to pay overtime to USDA-certified inspectors, which could expand independent processing markets.

Truth in beef labeling

Mark Bennett, a Baker County commissioner who also owns a cattle ranch in the southern part of the county near Unity, agrees with Martin and McElligott that the Biden administration's announcement is promising.

"I think it's a worthy undertaking," Bennett said. "Any time you have concentration it limits competition and the opportunity for innovation. This whole discussion is really crucial."

Bennett said one of the most common topics that come up in his conversations with other ranchers is mandatory country of origin labeling.

Although some meat sold in the U.S., including chicken, is required to be labeled to show where the animal was raised, that's not the case with beef.

Beef can be labeled as a product of the U.S. even if the cattle were raised in another country but were butchered in the U.S.

(Retailers also can include details about where animals were born and raised; they're just not required to do so.)

Ranchers and industry groups have been pushing for beef, which has not been subject to mandatory country of origin labeling since 2016, to be reinscribed into the labeling law along with chicken and other meats.

"American consumers want to know where their beef comes from," Bennett said.

There has been some interest in Congress in reinstating mandatory labeling for beef. It ended after officials from Mexico and Canada vowed to impose tariffs on American beef if the mandatory labeling continued.

A group of U.S. senators introduced legislation in September 2021 calling for the U.S. Trade Representative and U.S. Department of Agriculture to come up with a plan to improve beef labeling transparency.

McElligott said country of origin labeling "really needs to be addressed."

He pointed out that Americans' demand for beef has continued to grow even with rising retail prices.

He considers this evidence that people recognize the value of beef.

"If you look at everything beef gives you from a nutritional standpoint, it's still an economical part of your plate," McElligott said.

March:

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spoke next, focusing on King's optimism, his confidence that people could work together for a better world. Smith challenged listeners to be like King. He also said we should take the example of organizations such as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, who united in a partnership to further causes of justice and progress.

Prior to the MLK march, Smith expressed modesty at his inclusion.

"I don't know if I bring anything extra special" to the event, he said, but he had reflected on King and his legacy.

"I think he did a tremendous job in bringing things to our country that needed to be addressed," he said.

King's message, especially as it relates to unity, is particularly important and relevant these days, Smith added.

"He was not trying to draw lines between different races or different peoples," Smith said of King. "He was trying to show that we need to come together."

Smith in his speech expressed confidence that we, as a nation, can unify, even during a time in which many of us are divided. In a discussion in the week prior to the MLK march, he said he wishes many of our nation's leaders could express similar messages of togetherness.

Following Smith in his speech, Carol Jefferies, HCAC member, spoke briefly to encourage community. Also, she introduced Jessica Chavez, high school scholarship winner.

Chavez, who plans to



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Marchers carry signs Monday, Jan. 17, 2022, along East Main Street in downtown Hermiston during the annual Martin Luther King Jr. Day Peace March.

become a high school teacher, said King's message is "a guide" as she and others strive for a better world. Peaceful protest, she said, is key, in efforts toward racial equality.

Pastor Marlando Jordan of Sozo Church in Kennewick spoke at the event and said King was a man of God, a man of vision, a man of courage and a man of love.

Quoting King, the Kennewick preacher said, "Hate is too great a burden to bear."

Instead, he said, people should choose to love one another.

When people follow the path of love, instead of bigotry and hate, they can unite.

Continuing the work in Hermiston

There is a lot of work left to do if we are to move forward together in a just world, according to Rome in a discussion before the event. The Hermiston Cultural Awareness Coalition, formerly the Black International Awareness Club, is one of the longest existing cultural diversity organizations within the Hermiston and surrounding communities, he said. He added the purpose of the committee is to promote the teachings of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and to support diver-

sity and equality in the greater Hermiston Oregon community.

"It was started as a grassroots movement in 2000 with community members from all walks of life — clergy, small business owners, farmers, educators, community advocates and concerned community members that wanted to raise awareness and concern around the need for more diversity and equality within rural Eastern Oregon," Rome said.

Specifically, he said he takes to heart the following quote from King: "Life's most persistent and urgent question is 'What are you doing for others?'"

Rome credited HCAC's advocacy for encouraging the city of Hermiston to formally recognize MLK Day in 2000. He said he believes his nation, state and local community have made progress toward equality, but "we still have a long way to go for equal rights and equality for all" and he keeps King's words in mind.

"I truly believe if we take Dr. King's words to heart and reach out to all our neighbors, and not just to the neighbors that look and talk like us," Rome said, "we are one step closer in seeing Dr. King's dream come true."

Bentz:

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burning before thinning puts at extreme risk the very rivers and watersheds the designation is supposed to protect. It is like dropping a match in a tinderbox. It is impossible to contain these types of fires once they start.

"The River Democracy Act, if passed, would threaten watersheds, homes, businesses, farms, ranches, livestock and, most importantly, human lives."

Bentz also denounced the bill for not containing "explicit protections" for uses of the land, including, "sustainable timber harvests, hunting, grazing, fishing and mining."

"Regardless of legislative intent, the applicable agencies will have broad authority to restrict these activities," he said.

Local, regional disapproval

The RDA, introduced last year by Sen. Ron Wyden and backed by Sen. Jeff Merkley, both Oregon Democrats, has been condemned by several county commissioners in Eastern Oregon. Union County

commissioners voted in October 2021 to send a letter to Wyden asking him to remove the roughly 135 miles of waterways in their county from the act. Part of their issue with the RDA, they claimed, was that methods in place for designating rivers as Wild and Scenic were not adhered to.

"This failure to follow the guidelines that have been in place since 1968 as a well-versed system for designation is resulting in waterways that do not meet the criteria, spirit, intent or letter of the Wild and Scenic Act," according to the letter sent to Wyden.

Wallowa County commissioners have opposed the RDA on multiple occasions, and have said about 404 miles in their county would fall under the new designation.

They also wrote an October letter to Wyden voicing their disapproval of a lack of detailed maps outlining the affected waterways.

"The maps your office provided were not clear so the county went to the expense of having maps made that included half-mile buffers," they wrote. "These maps gave a visual of the buffers, affecting economic viability for our timber and grazing economies, public access and forest

management on an estimated 240,000 acres of public lands and 16,000 acres of adjacent private land in Wallowa County."

Grant County commissioners also sought out of the RDA.

"Prohibiting access to minerals that are necessary for creating green energy runs counter to the principles of conservation," they wrote in a November letter opposing the RDA. "In this respect, Senator Wyden's proposal is fundamentally anti-environmental."

The River Democracy Act also came under criticism in June for including waterways that were "completely dry upon inspection." The American Forest Resources Council, which represents the timber industry, said just 15% of the waterways are designated as rivers.

Senate Bill 192, which was introduced Feb. 3, 2021, has been before the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources Subcommittee on National Parks, according to congress.gov. It has yet to receive a vote on the House or Senate floor.

This report used information previously published by the Capital Press, The Observer, Wallowa County Chief and Blue Mountain Eagle.

Fire:

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further to include vacation rentals, a service station and more were next on the list, but Bennett said they needed additional funds to make up for the unanticipated costs of earlier phases of the project.

The commission was ultimately unanimous in approving the additional funds. Commissioners didn't act on the original request to expedite reimbursement payments, but the city previously admitted it

had fallen behind on what Hart and Bennett were owed. The facade and second story grants are reimbursements grants, meaning recipients spend the money up front and then are reimbursed a percentage of their costs based on the grant amount.

Corbett proposed the commission begin making reimbursement payments on a monthly basis instead of splitting up payments into thirds based on the project's progress.

Bennett told the commission the owners are nearly done with the facade and

second story projects. She estimated the facade will be done in six weeks and the second story in four months.

The commission also unanimously approved the creation of the Jump Start business competition. The program will solicit downtown retail business proposals from the public and then pick three winners.

The winners will then receive a \$20,000 forgivable loan to open their business. The loan will be forgiven in phases over the next two years as long as the winning businesses follow the guidelines of the contest.

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